



# *Maestro and* **Man**

*By Mark O. Steele*

**T**HE Gambling Ship was moored on the fourteenth floor of the Giralda Apartments on Hollywood's Sunset Strip.

It was strictly from Dun & Bradstreet. Fifty dollar bills in the dining room, keep the change. Roll 'em

high, bet 'em higher. White tie and tails, no back to the dress, and not much front. The best people.

Velvet drapes in the game room, blue plush on the tables. Step right up to chuck-a-luck, faro, roulette, chemin de fer, blackjack, crap. Place

Based on a radio script originally written for the CBS radio program *Suspense*

*By*

**JO EISINGER**

your bets, is he faded?

The player with the dice was a dapper little man, a trifle stoutish at the beltline, a trifle thinnish at the hairline. He wore a permanent, worried frown.

"I believe," he said in a soft, cultured voice to the stickman, "the bet is five thousand?"

"You're faded, Maestro."

The Maestro shook the leather cup with earnest concentration and rolled the chattering cubes across the board.

The stickman said, in a high monotone: "Eight's the point, Ada from Decatur. Get aboard, boys. Speculate so you can accumulate. Five grand faded, but plenty of room in the field. Put down a handful, pick up a hatful. There he goes!"

The dice rolled out of the cup, galloped across the board, clattered against the rail, bounced back and lay still.

"And it's a five," the stickman said. He picked up the dice, looked at them, tossed them back, without interrupting the flow of his monotone. "The money is eight. Make the point, break the joint. Seven to one the hard way. He's got a hunch, he bet a bunch. Get aboard, boys."

Ivory voices of the dice sounded again, and the stickman continued: "Ev'rybody plays, ev'rybody wins. I lay it or I take it. Right or wrong, I string along. There he goes!"

The dice bounded across the table, bounced back. The Maestro stared at them without expression on his dark, smooth face.

"And they read—days in the

week," the stickman said. "Seven and the man's down. Pass the dice and make some ice."

The Maestro turned away from the table and went to the big, far window. He looked out over the colorful carpet that was Hollywood at night, and his dark eyes were fixed on nothing. He simply stood and stared, hearing nothing of the muted murmur behind him, seeing nothing of the varicolored light-patterns below him.

A man came up behind him, a man with a hard face accentuated by his full evening dress, a large man with big hands and cold gray eyes.

"A tough one to lose, Maestro," he said out of one corner of his thin mouth.

The Maestro whirled, his dark eyes wide and startled as the eyes of a deer. "Oh!" he said in his soft voice that now took on a strangled quality. "Mr. Cripp!"

Cripp smiled thinly. "What's the matter, Maestro, scared?"

"Oh, no." This was quick, eager assurance. "It's just that I didn't expect——"

"Maybe you better have those nerves of yours overhauled, Maestro. But then I guess I'd have the jitters, too, if I dropped a bundle like you did tonight."

"What time is it, Mr. Cripp?"

This was pure anxiety.

"Too late to play any more, Maestro."

"But you don't close until two o'clock."

Cripp's mouth flattened into a thin line. He spoke from one end of it.

"I mean I think I got enough of your paper for one night. My stickman handed me these tabs." He exhibited a thin sheaf of slips. "Fifteen G's."

"But, surely, Mr. Cripp." This was with a great earnestness, with pleading dark eyes. "My I. O. U.'s are good. You know that. Don't you, Mr. Cripp?"

"Just what I wanted to talk to you about," Cripp said. "Have you seen my private office? You oughta. This way, Maestro."

Cripp put a friendly, if inflexible, hand under the little man's elbow and guided him through the welter of tables and full-dress customers to the foot of a short flight of stairs. Up this they went, and down a hall to a black door with a brass knob in the center of it. It looked like the door of a safe.

There was a safe inside, a large modern thing that squatted in sullen inviolability against one wall, at one end of the big black desk. Cripp took a chair behind this and waved to a couch.

"Sit down, Maestro."

The Maestro looked at the couch, at Cripp, at the safe, and at the array of pictures of prizefighters on the walls.

"It's getting late," he murmured hesitantly, "and I——"

"This won't take but a minute, Maestro. Sit down."

The Maestro sat on the edge of the couch, leaning forward anxiously. He put his fawn-like eyes on Cripp, and sat very still with his hands tense on his immaculate knees.

"How's Ricky?" Cripp asked conversationally.

The Maestro grew rigid, then relaxed slowly.

"Ricky?" he said uncertainly. "Why, Ricky is in the mountains. A vacation. Stale, you know."

"Great boy, Ricky," Cripp said genially. "Great welter. A punch like a heavyweight, footwork like a flyweight." Cripp sighed. "Yep, a great boy to have in your stable."

The Maestro leaned forward the fraction of an inch. His worried frown became more pronounced. He spoke as if he were pleading for his life, softly, with emphasis. The Maestro never raised his voice.

"Stable?" he echoed. "I have no stable, Mr. Cripp. Ricky is all I've got."

Cripp paid no attention. He leaned back in his chair and set dreamy gray eyes on the ceiling. He spoke as if he were in a daydream.

"Yeah . . . all my life I dreamed of having a boy like Ricky Martin. Not for the dough, not for what he'd bring . . . but you know, like having the fastest, cleanest, slimmest, strongest horse carrying your colors. He leaves 'em all behind, Maestro. I'd give any three of my boys for Ricky Martin."

The Maestro spoke with an earnestness that made him sound like a man pleading for his life. "That's very generous of you, Mr. Cripp. But I——" He spread his soft white hands.

"I didn't think you would," Cripp said. He smiled, and his smile had thorns in it. "Well, you're a lucky

man, Maestro, finding a boy like that. I often wonder how you did it. You haven't been in the fight game long in this town. I remember the first time I saw you and your boy hanging around the Olympic..."

"Yes," the Maestro said reminiscantly, "the box-fighting game is still a little strange to me. But all my life I've been an impresario, shall we say? . . . Paris, Brussels, Vienna . . . Ballet, opera, plays . . . And when I came to this country and saw Ricky, I could see——"

"Yeh, you could see, all right." Cripp pushed a box towards the Maestro. "Cigar?"

The Maestro took one, rolled it between his fingers, smelled it, bit off the tip. "Thank you very much."

Cripp dug a match out of his pocket and struck it on his nail. "I always say there's nothing like a good cigar to promote good feelings in a business talk."

The Maestro blew smoke, but tensed a little. "Business?" he asked cautiously "Business?"

Cripp shrugged, waved a big negligent hand. "Only a little matter of thirty-two G's. Seventeen before, fifteen tonight."

The Maestro sucked on his cigar. "Oh," he said. "The money. Yes, my luck has been a little—I..."

"You know," Cripp mused, "that's a very impressive signature you got, Maestro. Ve-ry impressive. Looks like a million bucks on——" He gestured at the thin sheaf of tabs on the glass top of his desk. "Must be worth at least thirty-two G's——"

The Maestro tossed his head. "Oh, of course, of course..."

"Yeh," Cripp said happily, "I'm glad to hear you say that."

"Then, if that's all, Mr. Cripp." The Maestro got to his feet. "I'll, ah——"

"Yep, that's all, Maestro."

"Then——" The Maestro started toward the door, but Cripp's crisp voice stopped him with one foot in the air.

"Just a minute, my friend."

The Maestro turned, polite inquiry riding his eyebrows. "Yes?"

Cripp's face was still. Only the lips moved. "You forgot something," he said.

The Maestro's eyebrows went from question to worry. "Oh?"

Cripp tapped the thin sheaf of tabs. "Your I. O. U.'s"

The Maestro's eyebrows drooped, one farther than the other, forming a picture of dark apprehension. "I——I don't understand," he faltered.

Cripp spoke very softly, so softly as to be hardly heard. "I told you I got enough of your paper. I want my money. Now."

The Maestro spoke quickly, eagerly, with outflung hand: "But I can't——I haven't——"

Cripp's voice crackled: "Then get it!"

"I must have time! Mr. Cripp, I——"

"I run a cash business!" Cripp snarled.

"But you gave me credit!" the Maestro protested.

"You got assets."

"What?"

"Ricky Martin."

"No! Oh, no!" It was pure anguish. The Maestro turned both palms upward, outstretched them. "No, Mr. Cripp!"

"Then pay," Cripp said it softly, but with contempt.

The Maestro began to pace the floor. His short legs took him from a corner to Cripp's desk, and he pounded on it. "No! I won't let you steal him from me! He's mine!" His voice was almost screaming. "I built him and you can't steal him from me!"

"I . . . want . . . that . . . boy," Cripp said deliberately

"No!" the Maestro yelled. "I love him like a brother!"

"Nuts!" Cripp spat. "You've swindled him on every fight."

"I won't give him up, I won't!" Cripp dropped his anger. He even picked up an overtone of cheerfulness.

"Then you'll pay my collectors thirty-two G's," he said happily.

"It's a gambling debt," the Maestro protested. "You can't——"

Cripp smiled.

"My collectors don't carry a summons. They like a barrel and fifty pounds of cement."

The silence that fell was almost three dimensional. Presently, the Maestro dropped a long sigh in the middle of it.

"Very well, Mr. Cripp. You leave me no alternative, and you have added greatly to my education."

Cripp grinned. "I don't think there's very much I can teach you,

Maestro. Only this time I'm out in front." He became crisp and businesslike, leaned towards the little man who stood so forlornly on the other side of the big desk. "Now I'll show you I'm a generous man, Maestro. Honest John Cripp. I run honest games and make a square deal. I'll give you fifty grand for Ricky, thirty-two in tabs, eighteen in cash. No beefs later."

"Thank you," the Maestro said sadly.

Cripp took a printed form from the drawer of his desk, wrote \$50,000 in its proper space, passed paper and pen to the Maestro.

"I filled this out a little while ago. You'll find it's legal. Just put that beautiful John Hancock at the bottom there."

The Maestro read the contract and signed it. Cripp took eighteen one-thousand dollar bills from the safe, counted them, and gave them to the small man whose worried frown had intensified.

"Thank you," the Maestro said again. He counted the money. He laid the fountain pen on the desk, but Cripp waved it away.

"You can keep the pen. Part of the deal."

The Maestro picked up the plastic and gold object, looked at it solemnly. "I shall treasure this," he said softly, "as the most expensive fountain pen in the world."

"Ricky's mine now," Cripp said cheerfully. "When'll he be back in town?"

"I expect him tomorrow."

"You'll tell him?"



The Maestro sighed. "Yes, I shall tell him. You know, Mr. Cripp, I don't think Ricky is going to like belonging to you."

Cripp chuckled. "Don't you worry, Maestro. I have a way of making people get along with me—even if it kills 'em." He laughed aloud. "Say! Pretty good, huh? Even if it kills 'em. You almost found out, huh?"

"Goodbye, Mr. Cripp," the Maestro said, and went out.

TIME was when Sam had been a pretty good ham-and-egger. He fought preliminaries, and sometimes a semi-windup. Sam could take it.

That's what they said about him. "Sammy can take it."

You can take it just so long in the fight game. The steady sock, sock to the jaw, the repeated pounding of the head does something to you. Punchy, that's what you get. You walk on your heels. You don't remember what it was happened to you five minutes ago. You meet your mother on the street, smile politely, and tip your hat. Punchy.

Sam was punchy, but he was a good trainer. He could do road work with a road runner or a jackrabbit. He'd put on the gloves with anybody.

Sam could still take it.

He met up with the Maestro just after he'd pulled Ricky out of a ballet company, and Sam trained the boy. Sam knew the way to throw a short punch and put your legs in it. That's where the good punches come from, your legs, even if they only

travel three inches. Dempsey knew that, Sam knew it. Sam made a puncher out of Rickey, and after only eight fights—all of them K. O.'s—here he was battering at the champ's door.

Another thing, you could depend on Sam doing what you told him. You could tell him only one thing at a time, and be sure. If you told him two things, he was likely to get them mixed up. But he was fine on one simple thing, with one-syllable orders.

So when the Maestro told Sam to sit in the office and wait for Ricky, Sam did just that. It wasn't clear whether Sam thought about anything while he waited four hours. But he looked out the window at the pretty secretary in the building across the street, and he didn't move from his chair. He kept a cauliflowered ear cocked for the telephone, another for the door.

When it opened, he turned with a glad smile which faded. "Oh," he said to the Maestro, "it's you."

"Ricky?" the Maestro asked.

Sam shrugged. "Nothin', boss."

The Maestro went to the desk and sat down. "I can't understand it. His train was in hours ago."

"Should I oughta go down to the jail, Boss?"

"Sit down, Sam," the Maestro said absently, and began to pace back and forth. His worry lines deepened, and his eyes were like those of a hunted fawn. Each time the elevator door in the corridor clanged, he stopped and eyed the door expectantly.

Sam went back to watching the

pretty secretary.

This continued for half an hour, and then two sets of footsteps clacked away from the elevator. The door opened, and there was Ricky, his tanned face glowing, his clear eyes alight with pleasure.

"Ricky!" the Maestro said, not yet looking at the girl. "My boy, I'm glad."

"Hello, Maestro," Ricky said in his deep voice. "Hiya, Sam."

Sam didn't hear. He was eyeing the girl. He took in her cloud of russet hair, her dark, pointed eyes, her yards of legs, her slender ankles.

"This is Lynn Carter," Ricky said.

The Maestro bowed abstractedly.

"How do you do?" she said in a voice of surprising depth and timbre. "Ricky's told me so much about you—"

"Howdy," Sam said, looking rather like a shaggy Spaniel pup.

Ricky laughed. It wasn't a real laugh, one that rolled out because something was funny. It was a society laugh, one that precedes a confession. The Maestro frowned at the sound of it.

"Have I got news!" Ricky announced with uneasy joy.

"Ah?" the Maestro said noncommittally.

The couple came into the office, and Ricky put Lynn into a chair like she was Dresden. He touched one of her small ears with a finger, and turned to the Maestro.

"You know how it is," he said. "A lake, and stars, and a canoe."

"No," the Maestro said suspiciously. "How is it?"

"It's swell," Ricky said warmly, and exchanged a four-volume glance with the girl.

"I found it all very colorful," she said.

"That's fine," the Maestro said. "Now, Ricky, there is something—"

"Wait a minute, Maestro."

"But I have a few things that I must tell you, Ricky. If Miss Carter will excuse—"

"But wait'll you hear what I got to tell you," Ricky said. "Lynn and I—well, we're going to be married."

It wasn't often you could catch the Maestro flatfooted and make him look stupid, with an open mouth. But that did it.

Sam said: "Married?" in the tone of voice the Maestro's expression reminded you of.

"Yeah," Ricky said, as if he were ashamed. "When we met, we—well—I don't know how to tell you this, Maestro. You know how I feel about you, but—"

"What are you trying to say, Ricky?" the Maestro asked softly.

The girl said: "Ricky is trying to tell you, Maestro, that he's quitting the ring."

"No!" the Maestro said. "No, Ricky!" He questioned the boy with dark, anxious eyes. "Say it isn't true!"

Ricky threw out his hands and spoke in a rush. "I must, Maestro. We're going to South America. Lynn's father wants me to—well, I'm going to work for him in an office."

The Maestro was quiet, but in-

tense. "But you can't, Ricky. Not just now, I——"

"I'm sorry, Maestro," Ricky said. "Don't make it tough for me. You know I always wanted to quit, always hated it. Now I have a good reason. We're taking the six-o'clock plane for Rio tonight."

The Maestro became agitated. He spread his hands, palms up, with slightly curled fingers. "You can't Ricky! You can't run out on me like this!"

Ricky flushed angrily. "I don't figure I'm running out on anybody."

"But you don't know what's happened, Ricky. I've sold you."

"Yeah?"

The word was like a sword. So was Ricky's look.

"To Cripp," the Maestro said.

It was over Lynn Carter's head. She looked anxiously from one to the other, but she didn't say anything. Ricky didn't say anything, either, for a while, but you could see it wasn't over his head, not by a long shot.

Finally, he asked softly: "Why didn't you say something to me first?"

"I couldn't, Ricky. I had to——"

"Had to, hell!" Ricky exploded furiously. "Buying and selling me like so much beef on the hoof at so much a pound. Buy me and sell me till I can't take any more punishment, and there's no buyer. Two, three years in Cripp's stable and I'm a punching bag for the new boys. A drooling idiot, like poor old

Sam here!"

"Who's a——a——", Sam began loudly.

Ricky went over and put a hand on Sam's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Sam. I just——"

Sam flung off the hand and leaped to his feet. "You can't call me a——I'll kill——d'ya hear?"

"Shut up, Sam! Sit down!" the Maestro commanded.

Sam stared at the furious little man, and the fight went out of him. He mumbled "Yes, boss," and sat down, his eyes full of a deep hurt.

The Maestro glared venomously at Lynn. "So you've done *this* to him. He never did have any judgment about——"

"All right, Maestro," Ricky cut in. "Stop it."

The Maestro walked slowly toward the wide-eyed girl, his words like a lash flicking her across the face: "You loved the way he looked in trunks. That beautiful body——"

"Cut it!" Ricky snapped and moved in toward the Maestro.

"You had to have him!" the Maestro said. "You had to bring him back and show him to your friends. You cheap, conniving, five-cent——"

Ricky slapped him. The Maestro staggered, and Ricky was in on him, slapping with the other hand. Then he grabbed the little man by the throat.

"Ricky, don't!" Lynn cried.

She jumped out of the chair, and grabbed Ricky's arm. He paid no attention to her. His eyes were glazed, his hands intent on murder.

He was shaking the Maestro as a mongoose shakes a snake.

"Ricky!" she screamed.

This penetrated. He turned slowly to look at her. The glaze left his eyes gradually even as he continued to shake the Maestro. He turned back to gaze intently at the Maestro's purpling round face, and dropped him.

The Maestro crumpled to the floor, gasping frantically.

Ricky took Lynn's arm. "Let's get outa here."

When they were gone, Sam ran over and lifted the little man to a sitting position.

"You all right, boss?"

The Maestro gasped a few more times, then spoke quietly: "I'm all right, Sam."

"Geez, he like to kill ya, boss!"

The Maestro got to his feet, went to his desk, sat down and stared at the door.

"Your face," Sam said. "It was a funny color."

After a long silence, the Maestro said: "You're a good boy, Sam."

Sam grinned with delight. "Sure, Sam's a good boy. Sam ain't what that was Ricky said, huh, boss? Ricky's a rat, huh, Boss?"

"We must do something, Sam," the Maestro said thoughtfully.

"Sure, boss. That Ricky—I'll kill 'em, boss. He called Sam a idiot, I'll kill 'em, d'ya hear?"

"Sam, Sam! Don't shout. You mustn't get excited that way. Sit down and relax."

Sam obeyed. The fury drained out of him, but his eyes were bright on

the Maestro, like a terrier awaiting a command.

Presently the Maestro began talking softly, still looking at the door. "Mr. Cripp must not hear of Ricky's quitting. The problem is——"

"Is Ricky quittin', boss?" Sam asked in surprise.

"If something happened to Ricky," the Maestro went on, "an accident—they happen every day, Sam."

"Sure, accidents happen, boss. Why, when I was a boy—or was it——?"

"I could go to Cripp," the Maestro interrupted, "and say 'It is a tragic thing, Mr. Cripp. A fine boy like that. *Your boy*, Mr. Cripp. Your \$50,000 boy. Yes, a tragic finale to a promising career.'"

Sam laughed. "Some tragic, boss! Some fin——finale!"

"But it must be an accident, Sam. Mr. Cripp must never be able to say that—you understand, Sam?"

"Sure, boss, like I was tellin' ya when I was a boy——"

The Maestro snapped his fingers, and his dark face lighted. "Sam! Listen!"

Sam was obediently silent.

"In Langton's gym—you know where the main valve for the steam room is, Sam?"

"To what, boss?"

"The valve, Sam. The one that lets live steam into the steam room."

Sam wrinkled his face. Then he smoothed it into a wide smile. "The gadget the guy turns on and off the steam with? That what you mean, boss?"

"Yes, Sam. Good boy!"

"Sure, I know where it is, boss. It's under the stairs in the basement on the other side of the gym. You know, on the side by——"

"Yes, Sam," the Maestro said gently. "Now listen carefully. Do you think you could get under the stairs in the basement?"

"Aw, sure, boss. They let me go anywhere I want to in that gym. Why, once I took a dame——" Sam broke off and sighed in memory. "She wouldn't stay," he said sadly.

"And do you think you could open the valve as far as it will go?"

Sam frowned. "You mean—— hey, boss, you mean for all the steam to go fast into the steam room?"

"Exactly, Sam."

"Boy! That's some hot. You can't stay there in all that hot. Was you up to the gym when poor Kid Wells got all that hot because the valve broke and the door was stuck? When they brung him out? Boy, that was some lookin' dead Kid Wells, all right."

"Yes, Sam, a very tragic accident."

"Some tragic, all right, boss."

The Maestro unstrapped his handsome wristwatch and handed it to Sam.

"Can you tell the time, Sam?"

"Sure, boss," Sam said in an offended voice. "You think I'm a dumb? The little hand is on a two, an' the big hand is on a six. That's half past two, huh?"

"That's right. And when the little hand is on a five, and the big hand

on twelve, it will be——"

Sam looked intently at the watch for a moment. "Five o'clock!" he said triumphantly. "See? I'm no dumb, like that Ricky——"

"Now listen, Sam. At exactly five o'clock, you will open the valve as far as it will go."

"For all the hot?"

"For all the hot."

"But boss," Sam protested, "you can't stay in there with all the hot. Was you up to the gym when——"

"I won't be in the steam room, Sam. Ricky will——alone."

**H**E KEPT calling Ricky's apartment at the Shoreham, each time with growing anxiety, and was finally answered shortly after four.

"Ricky," he said into the phone, "this is——"

"What do you want?" Ricky asked coldly.

"I want to apologize," the Maestro said in a rush. "Don't hang up, Ricky. Hear me out. I'm abject, I'm miserable. I lost my head and I'm desperately sorry." The Maestro's eyes were dark with shame, his mouth drooped, and his voice was rich with supplication.

"All right," Ricky said, "you're sorry, everybody's sorry. Let's leave it at——"

"No, Ricky. Don't talk. Listen. I can't let you go away like this. I must see you once more. I must know that when we part there is no bitterness. That you think of me kindly. With affection, as I think of you. Please, Ricky, please?"

"Maestro, I don't think——"

"Ricky, I beg you. I will never be able to rest if you don't believe me. Just for a few minutes, Ricky. Meet me at Langton's gym. You have all your old boxing things there, in the locker room. Ricky, will you give them to me, in remembrance of things past? It's a small thing to ask, Ricky. I want to keep them in memory of our friendship, our very splendid friendship."

"Well, oh hell, Maestro. But just for a few minutes. I have to meet Lynn at the airport at six."

"Oh, thank you, Ricky!" the little man said earnestly, and his face was alight with gratitude. "Thank you. We'll meet her together, for I want to apologize to her, too."

"Okay, meet you at Langton's in fifteen minutes."

The Maestro cradled the phone. The expression of faint worry came back to his face as he left the office. He took a cab to the gym where young men in trunks and older men in nondescript clothes spoke pleasantly to him. He gave them abstracted nods, and hung about the entrance and watched the clock with anxious eyes.

Sam was nowhere in sight, but he wasn't worried about Sam. The instructions had been simple, and in words of one syllable. Sam would do his part. The Maestro looked at the clock again.

"Waitin' for Ricky?" a familiar voice asked.

The Maestro jumped, turned to face Cripp. The cold gray eyes looked steadily into the Maestro's.

"Oh! Mr. Cripp!"

"Why do I always seem to scare you, Maestro? You got nothin' to worry about——have you?"

"Worry?" The Maestro gave a hollow laugh. "Not a thing in the world, Mr. Cripp."

"That's good," the big man said. "Ricky get in?"

"Ricky? Oh, no," the Maestro said. "He called me. He won't be in until tomorrow."

"Did you tell him about our deal?"

"Of course. He was very pleased."

"I can do a lot for that boy," Cripp said.

"Yes," the Maestro said eagerly. "That is what Ricky feels. He was eager to get back to work. Well, Mr. Cripp, nice having seen you . . ."

"Glad to hear Ricky feels all right about it," Cripp said, with his thin smile. "Because I heard something I don't like. I heard Ricky was quittin' the ring."

The Maestro's eyebrows jumped with surprise. "Ricky quit?" He chuckled. "That's silly. The ring is in his blood."

"Lucky you," Cripp said grimly. "Because he could quit. Nobody can force a boy to fight. And I couldn't collect my fifty G's from him."

"Yes," the Maestro said. "I understand."

"I thought you would, Maestro. Well, I'll expect to see you and Ricky tomorrow morning, and sign the papers. Be there."

"Of course. Goodbye, Mr. Cripp."

The Maestro sighed with relief as Cripp went through the door with



out meeting Ricky. He looked at the clock again, and didn't even hear the shouts in the gym as two boys sparred in the ring.

Then Ricky came. His clear blue eyes were cold, and his full mouth was tight. "Hello, Maestro. Let's get it over with."

"Ricky, I'm glad to see you," the Maestro said as they walked toward the locker room. "I was afraid you weren't coming."

"I had to call Lynn," Ricky said shortly.

In the locker room, Ricky opened his locker. "There they are," he said.

The Maestro gazed almost reverently at the punching bag, gloves, shoes, trunks, and robe. He took out one pair of the gloves, dangled them from their laces.

"Remember this pair, Ricky? The night you fought Kid Foy. How can we ever forget that night? I remember the newspapers: 'Last night a new star of the ring was born. Ricky Martin, sensational new——'"

"Cut it, Maestro."

"Yes, of course. I know how you feel. Ricky, let me apologize again. I feel like a dog about what I did."

"Look," Ricky said uncomfortably. "I'm not sore any more. Let's forget the whole thing. I shouldn't have done what I did, either."

"Oh, but you should have, Ricky. You did exactly right. But, as you say, let's forget it. Eh, I suppose there isn't a chance of your changing your mind?"

"Not a chance," Ricky said. "Lynn wants me to quit, and she's right. Come on, Maestro, take this stuff

and let's go."

The Maestro made no move to take the things out of the locker. He looked anxiously up at Ricky. "Ricky—I want to ask one more favor. I——" He broke off, looking embarrassed.

"Well?"

"Never before, Ricky, have I been guilty of such sentimentality. It surprises even me. I am afraid I did not realize how much you have come to mean to me. I——I shall miss you greatly."

Ricky's face softened. He laid a hand on the Maestro's shoulder. "I know," he said. "I'll miss you, too. But what is it you want me to do, Maestro?"

"Ricky, for the last time——just once more——I want to see you in the ring."

"Aw, Maestro——"

"Please, Ricky, humor me. It means more than I can tell you. Outside, with one of the boys. Please!"

"But I got to meet Lynn, Maestro."

"There's plenty of time, Ricky. One round, and we'll be in the steam room well before five. Please, Ricky?"

Ricky frowned and pulled abstractedly at one ear. "You always could talk a guy out of his right eye," he muttered.

"Good boy, Ricky!" The Maestro's voice was jubilant. "You get into your shoes and trunks, and I'll arrange for using the ring."

The Maestro went out, and Ricky began shedding his tweed suit. When he was in his trunks and lacing up

his shoes, Sam came shambling in.

Sam saw Ricky, stopped, said: "Oh." Then he went toward a door marked "Men."

"Oh, Sam," Ricky said. Sam halted. "Sam, I want to apologize. I'm sorry for what I said."

"Sure," Sam muttered, "some sorry, all right. Call me a——put the slug on the bass——sure goin' to be some sorry, all right." Sam broke into loud, unexpected laughter, and went through the door. He was chuckling gleefully when he came out.

"What are you talking about?" Ricky asked.

Sam was suddenly confidential. Was you up the gym when poor Kid Wells—— He broke off, started for the exit.

"What about Kid Wells?" Ricky demanded.

"Some tragic fin——finale," Sam said. "All that tragic hot——"

He went through the door, and Ricky frowned at it. He stood for some time, frowning. Then he took a pair of gloves from his locker and started for the ring, still frowning thoughtfully.

One of Cripp's boys had been persuaded to go one round with Ricky, a boy named Aloysius but calling himself the Jersey Tiger. Not that he lived in Jersey, or was ferocious, but he was called the Jersey Tiger.

Quite a large group of mixed nationalities crowded up to the ring as the referee gave final instructions. The boys shook hands, retired to their corners, and the gong sounded.

Ricky slid out in a fast glide, rocked the Tiger with a left hook, and slipped back away from a return. He was in again instantly, left, right, left, right. Ten seconds had gone.

Ricky was a bird on the breeze, he was music. He flowed, he didn't just move. His feet never seemed quite to touch the canvas, and he was lithe and fast as a jungle cat. His hands were murderous clubs, catapulted by smooth and rippling muscles, and each punch had his legs in it. Jabs, hooks, crosses, not ever a haymaker.

It was over in two minutes.

"——eight, nine, ten, out!" the referee shouted over the tumult of the audience. He held up Ricky's hand.

The Maestro helped him out of the ring.

"You were beautiful, Ricky! Such grace, such power. Like a ballet of destruction. Today, Ricky, you were at your peak."

"And that's why I'm getting out, Maestro. I want to stay the way I am. That's the last pair of gloves I'll ever put on."

"Let me help you off with them, Ricky. We have just time for a quick steam, a shower, and then the airport."

THEY WENT downstairs, through the heavily padded, air-tight door into the steam room, smelling like a hot fog. The sound of lazily escaping steam played obbligato to their conversation.

"Hot," Ricky said.

"Good for your muscles."

The Maestro took Ricky's wet arm, steered him through the thick, opaque atmosphere toward chairs.

"If I remember right, we'll find seats over this way." They did. "Let's sit here, Ricky." They sat down, luxuriating in the heat. "Like old times, eh, Ricky?"

"Yeah. Say, isn't it too hot?"

"Not yet, Ricky. Lean back and close your eyes. Remember the night I found you, Ricky, back stage at the Met? You wanted to be a ballet dancer, I was carrying a spear. I must laugh when I think of those days. You had strength, grace, muscle. But you didn't know what to do with them. I showed you. Not ballet, years of thankless sacrifice. I found you, I found the ring, I brought the two of you together. And in one year you're at the top. A hard year, a long year. Poverty, hardship, tank town fights. But we went through it together, and it brought us closer together. Yes, Ricky, I can't help thinking that your leaving the ring is the tragic finale to a brilliant career."

"A what?" Ricky asked sharply. "Did you say a tragic finale?"

"Yes, why?"

After a long silence, Ricky said: "Nothing."

The Maestro peered through the thick steam, but couldn't see Ricky. "Something the matter, Ricky?"

"I guess not," Ricky said. "Go on."

"Then we got your first fight in New York," the Maestro said. "Remember that night, how nervous you were? Your New York debut, your

first taste of the big time! What a night! Not Offenbach's *Gaité Parisienne* at the Met, but the roar of fifteen thousand throats at Madison Square Garden. And do you remember the last thing you said to me before you went into the ring?"

"Look, Maestro," Ricky said restively, "I got to go. I imagine it's darn near five."

"Just another minute or two, Ricky." The Maestro, thinking of the location of the door from where he sat, wheedled with his voice but concentrated his thoughts on ways of keeping Ricky here until the first increase in steam. At that moment, the Maestro knew what he would do; he would run to the door, through it, and lock it on the outside. And Ricky would be like Kid Wells.

"Tell me, Ricky, how did you happen to meet Lynn?"

"Well, she was at the hotel, and one night I was dancing with her and it happened. I don't know how. You know——"

"Ah, yes," the Maestro said tenderly. "Love at first sight. It happens."

His voice changed. It carried suggestions, inferences. "Then you don't know much about her?"

"Enough," Ricky said shortly.

"What are you getting at?"

The Maestro peered through the steam. "Ah, er, nothing, nothing."

"Come on," Ricky said roughly. "I know that tone too well, Maestro. What is it?"

"Please forget it, Ricky," the Maestro said hurriedly. "I didn't

mean anything."

"Am I going to have to get tough?"

"No, Ricky, no. I——well, after all, I'm your friend, the best friend, perhaps, you'll ever have. Friendship implies certain duties. And I suppose it is my duty to tell you what I know. Right?"

"Come on, come on, let's hear it."

"Well, frankly, Ricky, your Lynn Carter is not everything she represents herself to be. You see, I used to know her."

"Yeah? It's damn funny she never said anything about you."

"Oh, but she didn't know me. But I knew her, and I knew the man——men——she lived with in New York."

Ricky suddenly loomed over the Maestro, his jaw set, arms hanging half bent at his side.

"You little rat!" he grated.

"Ricky, what's come over you? Why are you looking that way?"

"I didn't tell you that her father and mother owned the hotel, and that she's lived in that resort all her life! I didn't tell you she'd never been to New York before. You lied to me. Why?"

"No, Ricky, I swear——" The Maestro broke off, assumed his apologetic tone again. "Yes, I lied, but it was only to try to keep you in the ring where you belong. You see, it means so much to——"

Ricky suddenly lashed out with his fist. It caught the Maestro on the jaw, and Ricky had put his legs in

it. The Maestro tumbled over on the floor. He lay there like a deflated punching bag.

"See what that means to you," Ricky snarled, and left the steam room . . .

It was the searing, scorching, unendurable heat that brought him to, and he knew what had happened. He rolled to his elbows and knees, trying not to breathe death into his lungs, and tried to stand. But there was only jelly in his lungs. He started to crawl, stopped, tried to locate the chairs as guideposts. He couldn't see two inches before him. He began to crawl again, an awkward scrambling motion, like a wounded pink seal. He screamed once, sharply, hysterically, but the roar of escaping steam drowned out his cry . . .

On the plane to Rio, Ricky grinned at Lynn. "How're you, Mrs. Martin?"

"My face feels as if I'm blushing."

"And it improves your looks."

"Why did you decide so suddenly to get married?" she asked.

He grinned again. "People were beginning to talk about you. I had to protect you."

"You're a goof," she said. "By the way, why didn't the Maestro come with you to the plane?"

"We had a row," Ricky said. "He had a new scheme to keep me, something he was all steamed up about, but I didn't go for it."